Diego Rivera. *Flower Day* (detail), 1925. Collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

EAST MEETS WEST

Latin American Liberation Theology and Eastern Orthodox Social Ethics

Is a Conversation Possible?

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How should Christians respond to situations of poverty and social injustice? Proponents of Latin American liberation theology and teachers of Eastern Orthodoxy typically frame their answers in very different ways.[1] For example, the liberationist call to fundamentally alter economic, social, and political structures for the benefit of the poor differs from the Orthodox focus on exercising philanthropy within extant political structures. Liberationists are heirs of the Catholicism of Vatican II and the political and cultural legacy of the West, while many Orthodox Christian populations are relative newcomers to democratic societies (or have never truly made this transition) and maintain sensibilities shaped by centuries of survival under Byzantine, Ottoman, and Communist rulers.

Liberation theology originated as a distinct movement within the Catholic Church in Latin America during the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1960s and '70s. Although John Paul II and Benedict XVI affirmed the centrality of concern for the poor to Catholic social teaching, the pontificate of Francis I has brought a new level of attention to liberationist concerns about unjust political structures. In contrast, Orthodoxy looks to theologians such as SS. Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, who fully integrated social concern with doctrinal teaching, liturgical practice, and spiritual formation. Following their example, it is not controversial to praise or encourage acts of philanthropy, though active compassion for the victims of injustice and prophetic critiques of oppression have often been neglected in practice. Given the brutal persecution of the Church by communist parties in so many traditionally Orthodox lands during the twentieth century, it is understandable that the Marxist-sounding formulations of liberation theologians rankle many Orthodox. To note criti-

[1] Peter C. Bouteneff, "Liberation: Challenges to Modern Orthodox Theology from the Contextual Theologies," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63/3-4 (2012), 30. See also Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012), 70.

[2] Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 57.

[3] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 6ff.

[4] Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 10.

[5] Ibid., 12.

[6] Olivier Clément, "Orthodox Reflections on 'Liberation Theology,'" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 29:1 (1985): 67.

[7] Bouteneff, 33.

[8] Ibid., 32.

cally points of commonality between liberation theology and Orthodoxy is not, however, to betray the memory of the millions of martyrs and confessors who suffered from Communist oppression. Instead, it is intended to bring liberationist perspectives into dialogue with Orthodox teaching in a way that encourages the Orthodox to articulate and live with integrity our distinctive vocation on behalf of the poor, needy, and downtrodden with whom Jesus Christ identified Himself.

A first point of comparison concerns God's intentions for the flourishing of the poor. Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian Catholic priest considered the founder of liberation theology, stresses God's desire to liberate the poor from deprivation, calling for a "preferential option for the poor" grounded in God's universal love and demanding special consideration for those suffering from social injustice.[2] His liberation theology arises from critical reflection on the practical experience of struggling against the social evils experienced by the people of his region.[3]

Gutierrez teaches that Latin American poverty contradicts the demands of the Gospel proclaimed by Christ.[4] He teaches that witnessing to the victory over the tomb requires opposing the unjust oppression and death experienced by the poor.[5] Similarly, the Orthodox theologian Olivier-Maurice Clément sees the Lord's resurrection as calling for the "defeat [of] every form of death, slavery and degradation in human souls and bodies."[6] Peter Bouteneff agrees that the Church's deepest commitments call for "a consistent life-ethic" that addresses "abortion, reproductive technology, poverty, politics… war, healthcare, etc."[7] He sees the liberationists' focus on "God's preferential option for the poor" as resonating with the preaching and philanthropic practice of Basil, John Chrysostom, and other Fathers.[8]

In this light, *a second point of comparison concerns the kind of praxis promoted by each tradition in response to poverty*. Gutierrez defines praxis as "a transformative activity that is influenced and illumined by Christian love."[9] He advocates "concrete actions" that show love for neighbors and for Christ, who identifies himself with "our suffering brothers and sisters."[10] He calls for orthopraxy as "doing the truth" in faithfulness to the Lord's teaching and example.[11]

Eastern Orthodoxy also calls for actions consistent with right belief and right worship. John McGuckin notes that *philanthropia* requires deeds that manifest Christ's love and mercy for human beings. He even calls philanthropy "the fifth mark… of the Church's identity." St. Maria Skobtsova of Paris would agree:

The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead, I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says "I": "I was hungry, and thirsty, I was sick and in prison." To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need.[13]

In contrast to liberation theology, however, Orthodoxy does not construe praxis in relation to political or revolutionary action, focusing instead on personal acts of compassion. Basil, for example, used his own inheritance to care for the needy and established philanthropic foundations to serve the sick, the elderly, orphans, and the homeless. Insisting that the goods of creation are for the common benefit of

[9] Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 99.

[10] Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 50.

[11] Ibid., 98.

[12] John McGuckin, "Embodying the New Society: The Byzantine Christian Instinct of Philanthropy," in *Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, ed. Matthew J. Pereira (New York: Theotokos Press, 2010), 60.

[13] *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2003), 30.

[14] *On Social Justice: St. Basil the Great*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 38.

[15] Theodore Damian, "John Chrysostom's Teaching on Neighborly Love," in *Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, ed. Matthew J. Pereira (New York: Theotokos Press, 2010), 114.

all, he denounced those who hoarded resources as thieves who did not show and would not receive God's mercy.[14] Likewise, Chrysostom founded organizations in Antioch and Constantinople to provide basic necessities to the destitute.[15] Basil and Chrysostom saw the physical needs of the poor as manifesting the very body of Christ, so that caring for them was truly a liturgical action. [16] Communion with the Lord in the Eucharist demanded caring for him in the bodies of the poor.[17]

Liberationist ecclesial communities integrate study, worship, and the pursuit of justice, in some ways paralleling Basil's integration of philanthropy with communal life and worship. Gutierrez teaches that a community is necessary for living out and celebrating Christian love.[18] "The vocation of the entire church to be a church of the poor" is rooted in the universal love of God.[19] Following the example of Basil's philanthropic complex, for centuries Orthodox monastic communities have also undertaken philanthropic ministries addressed to the needs of their neighbors. In the 1930s, St. Maria Skobtsova founded houses of hospitality for the poor in Paris. She later died in a Nazi concentration camp, where she and others in her community were sent as a punishment for assisting Jews.[20]

In order for Christian action with the poor to be effective, it must be informed by sound knowledge of the relevant social problems to be addressed. Gutierrez finds that the grave circumstances of Latin American poverty call for social scientific analysis, but not in a way that makes theology the servant of other methods or agendas.[21] He explicitly rejects the atheistic and totalitarian dimensions of Marxism as well as efforts to synthesize Christianity and Marxism.[22] Indeed, "if there is a meeting, it is between theology and the social sciences, and not between theology and Marxist analysis," except "insofar as dimensions of Marxism are part of social scientific discourse in Latin America." And since theology and the social sciences are distinct, independent fields, it is not legitimate "to turn theological reflection into a premise in the service of a specific political choice."[23]

Due to Communist persecution, skepticism about the growing influence of secularist agendas, and a focus on true liberation as mystical union with God, Orthodox thinkers have rarely identified themselves with the social analysis of liberation theologians.[24] (Clément is certainly atypical in affirming collaboration with "'open' Marxists by working for the liberation of the poor and oppressed" and criticizing the economic abuses of the West.[25]) Yet while it would be anachronistic to look for contemporary modes of analysis in patristic sources, Basil and Chrysostom did bring a critical perspective—appropriate to their time and place—to the question of why so many people were impoverished. For example, Basil commented on the social problems, especially hoarding of resources by the wealthy, that impoverished many to the point of selling their children into slavery in order to survive.[26] "If only each one would take as much as he or she requires to satisfy his or her immediate needs, and leave the rest to others who equally needed it, no one would be rich—and no one would be poor."[27] Chrysostom criticized those who used grandiose acts of public generosity to advance their social standing.[28] Combating the self-centeredness and pride of the wealthy, he stressed the mutual dependence of rich and poor, while also proclaiming that the needy were superior in the eyes of God. By helping

[16] Susan Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 97.

[17] See also Emmanuel Clapsis, "Wealth and Poverty in Christian Tradition," in *Church and Society: Orthodox Perspectives, Past Experiences, and Modern Challenges*, ed. George P. Liacopulos, (Boston: Somerset Hall Press, 2007), 97–100.

[18] Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 13.

[19] Ibid., 14.

[20] Skobtsova, 29. See also Sergei Hackel, *Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova 1891–1945*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press), 1982.

[21] Gutierrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free*, 58.

[22] Ibid., 61–63.

[23] Ibid., 66.

them materially, the wealthy benefited themselves spiritually.[29]

Even as Basil and Chrysostom analyzed the economic and social systems of their day, contemporary Orthodox scholars may use social scientific methods to understand the conditions that produce current social problems and the means of their structural redress. For example, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew writes that "economic development in itself and the globalization that serves it lose their value when they cause deprivation among the many and excessive concentration of wealth among the few."[30] He states that Orthodoxy affirms economic development that promotes the common good and enables various cultural groups to flourish as they maintain their identities. [31] Current economic conditions have brought "the international elite to… new heights of wealth, while the fate of the poorest has visibly worsened."[32] Though explicitly not "advocating sharing of wealth or eradication of poverty through some abstract dogma or Marxist formula," Bartholomew stresses "the spiritual value of social justice" and the duty of governments to promote the interests of the people.[33] Such a vision requires social scientific analysis in order to understand the effects of economic development, globalization, poverty, and other factors. Even as the Ecumenical Patriarch's advocacy for environmental stewardship draws on contemporary scientific findings about human corruption of the natural world, Orthodox thinkers should also draw on the results of social science in order to address poverty and other social problems.[34]

A third point of comparison is the role of the Eucharist in shaping an appropriate response to poverty. Gutierrez especially emphasizes the sacrament's demand for social action on behalf of the downtrodden:

The bond which unites God and man is celebrated—that is, effectively recalled and proclaimed—in the Eucharist. Without a real commitment against exploitation and alienation and for a society of solidarity and justice, the Eucharistic celebration is an empty action, lacking any genuine endorsement by those who participate in it… "To make a remembrance" of Christ is more than the performance of an act of worship; it is to accept living under the sign of the cross and in the hope of the resurrection. It is to accept the meaning of a life that was given over to death—at the hands of the powerful of this world—for love of others.[35]

The petitions in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy call for God to bless the world and its inhabitants with peace and salvation, especially asking for mercy for those who suffer from poverty, illness, captivity, and other forms of human degradation. McGuckin comments that the petitions of the Liturgy present a vision of blessing that is "not spiritually disembodied… but one of body and soul; not an isolated individual phenomenon; but a matter of compassion for all who sail, or journey, or labor, or are sick."[36]

Quoting the priest's exclamation in the Liturgy, "Thine own of Thine own, we offer unto Thee on behalf of all and for all," Skobtsova emphasizes that communicants join themselves to Christ's offering on behalf of the world. "In this sense, the liturgy outside the church is our sacrificial ministry in the church of the world, adorned with living icons of God…"[37] Eucharistic liturgy became the lens through which she saw her service of the poor and oppressed as her participation in the offering of the Lord, a liturgy in daily life. Kalaitzidis

[24] See Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 10; and Joseph Allen, "An Orthodox Perspective of 'Liberation,'" Greek Orthodox Theological Review 26:1–2 (1981): 71–80.

[25] Clément, 66.

[26] Basil quoted in Paulo Siepierski, "Poverty and Spirituality: Saint Basil and Liberation Theology," Greek Orthodox Theological Review 33:3 (1988): 319–22.

[27] Ibid.,323-325.

[28] Blake Leyerle, "John Chrysostom on Almsgiving and the Use of Money," *Harvard Theological Review* 87:1 (1994): 32.

[29] Ibid., 46.

[30] Bartholomew I, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 160.

[31] Ibid., 163.

[32] Ibid., 164.

[33] Ibid., 170.

writes that the Eucharist challenges the very premises of unjust and oppressive divisions between people.[38] David J. Dunn teaches that those who "systemically preserve the economic divisions that characterize this fallen world… violate the communion that Communion is all about." Following St. Paul's concern about the neglect of the poor in the Corinthians' Lord's Supper, he thinks that "Unworthy Communion is feasting with Christ, yet allowing our sister or brother at home to starve to death… Eucharistic worthiness requires opening our tables to those who have nothing good to eat."[39] Basil, Chrysostom, and Gutierrez would surely agree.

As an Orthodox priest who studies moral theology and social ethics, I know that this brief discussion has barely skimmed the surface of very profound matters. Nonetheless, bringing these perspectives into dialogue highlights the imperative of Orthodox Christians to find effective ways to show Christ's love to those who lack the basic necessities of life or live in settings where they are treated as less than human beings in God's image and likeness. The specific language of "liberation" is not essential to this calling, and neither is any given school of social or political analysis. What is essential, and perfectly genuine to our faith, is treating others with the love and care due to the living icons of Christ. If we receive his body and blood, we must manifest his healing, blessing, and mercy in tangible ways to the suffering people through whom he is present to us. Their sick, malnourished, and tortured flesh is also his.

Yet since no individual exists in isolation, engagement with social, economic, and political problems will often be necessary in order to speak and act in ways that effectively address social injustice and promote orders that support at least a glimpse of the kind of blessed life for which we pray in every liturgical gathering. Earthly realms or ideologies cannot be substantively identified with the Kingdom of God. Nevertheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that those who believe in the Incarnation may not abandon their neighbors for the sake of an imaginary and disembodied spirituality that disregards those with whom Christ identified himself. If benefiting them is not a theological imperative, I do not know what is. Surely, every act of mercy is in some way an icon of his Kingdom. ✻

[34] See *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew I*, ed. John Chrysssavgis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

[35] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 265.

[36] McGuckin, 64.

[37] Skobtsova, 81.

[38] Kalaitzidis, 101.

[39] David J. Dunn, "Going Away Hungry: The Economics of Eucharistic Worthiness," in Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition, 274.

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